

The Idea of a University: A universal institution in a globalised world

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The current university in a globalised world is facing all kinds of new challenges: an increasing commodification of research, a growing number of cases of scientific fraud, pressure on teaching, and internationalisation within still predominantly national frameworks. Taken together, all these elements contribute to the impression among the general public of a certain crisis of the current university. The central question of this paper is to what extent the original ideal of the university as a universal institution, in the period of its foundation in the High Middle Ages, can function as a source of inspiration for the concerns of the contemporary university. It will be shown that many traditions connected to this ideal can still function as valid models to reflect upon the university today, offering as such a nice example of how history of (university) education can be of use in the ongoing public debate and policy making process. The exercise to think about the university in this way stems from an intensive seminar, organised for master students in educational theory at Ghent University and the KU Leuven (Belgium). In the seminar we have been searching for the idea and the identity of the contemporary university from a historical and philosophical perspective.

Introduction: An intensive seminar on the idea of a university

The current university in a globalised world is facing all kinds of new challenges: an increasing commodification of research, a growing number of cases of scientific fraud, pressure on teaching, falling standards in education (allegedly or real), internationalisation within still predominantly national frameworks, increasing competition between and within previously collegiate institutions and a growing alienation between students on the one hand, as consumers in demand of a vocational training, and professors on the other hand, presenting themselves as producers of knowledge, offering primarily a specialised scholarly education. Taken together, all these elements contribute to

the impression among the general public of a certain crisis of the current university. The central question of this paper is to what extent the original ideal of the university as a universal institution, in the period of its foundation in the High Middle Ages, can function as a source of inspiration for the concerns of the contemporary university¹.

This exercise to think about the university in this way stems from an intensive seminar, organised in 2011 and 2012 for master students in educational theory at Ghent University and the KU Leuven (Belgium)². In the seminar we have been searching for the idea and the identity of the contemporary university from a historical and philosophical perspective. What is the meaning of the university as a universal institution in a globalised world? Which challenges the university has to face and to what extent these go to the heart of its identity? What is the core of this age-old institution that on the one hand appears to be able to adapt itself continuously to new demands and expectations, but the survival of which on the other hand seems to be threatened increasingly as well? What can students expect of an education at such an institution, which transforms itself permanently? And what is expected from the student? Or otherwise, what kind of thinking about the university, the student and the process of studying is created in the current discourse? And can we still talk about the university and the student or do these notions have to be replaced by those of the company and the consumer? These are just some of the topics that we have been dealing with during our exploration to the essence of the university.

The seminar consisted of two parts. During the first part, the students had to prepare themselves by reading and discussing texts that offered a historical view on the whole issue or that focused on the challenges of the contemporary university³. The first two-day session was concluded with an animated debate on the question "what is a university?". During the second part, the students presented their own findings to each other. By interviewing staff and students, the idea(s) that had been discussed during the first part had to be tested out at a specific department of one of the participating universities. How did (future) philosophers, historians, political and social scientists, economists, psychologists, (agricultural) engineers, astronomers, physicists, chemists and physicians look upon the idea of the university?

However, instead of presenting the results of these small-scale and far from representative exercises in the format of a survey of how these days students and staff think about the university, we started from their opinions and views in order to develop our own vision on the university - inevitably somewhat naïve and idealistic. By falling back on the medieval ideal of the university as a universal institution, in four paragraphs it will be shown that many traditions connected to this ideal can still function as valid models to reflect upon the university today: 1) the university as a community of masters and students, open to everyone; 2) the universal aims of an academic education and the universality of knowledge; 3) being at the service of the public interest and therefore enjoying a number of privileges, the highly praised academic freedom being one of them;

¹ See J. Fried, *Die Aktualität des Mittelalters. Gegen die Überheblichkeit unserer Wissensgesellschaft*, Stuttgart, Thorbecke, 2002.

² Although a number of colleagues at both institutions contributed to the seminar, we take the full responsibility for the arguments developed in this article. Nevertheless, we would like to thank Pieter Verstraete, Jan Masschelein, all the students who participated in the seminar and their interviewees for their practical collaboration and intellectual input.

³ A bibliographical list of the texts that were discussed during the first part of the seminar is provided in attachment.

4) and all this to the benefit of the whole Christian world, without being hampered by national or regional borders.

Remark that the focus is entirely and exclusively on the ideal of the medieval university as a universal institution, without paying attention neither to the differences of opinion about this ideal existing at the time, nor to the question how these ideas and ideals were put into practice at different localities. In result this article should be considered a philosophical exercise in which a true historical background is used to build up an argument relating to the present. As such it offers an example of how history of (university) education can be of use in the ongoing public debate and policy making process. Although most of the contemporary examples referred to are taken from the Flemish context, the challenges and questions that are dealt with are certainly relevant for many universities in a globalised world⁴.

The university as a universal institution

1. A community of masters and students

The commonest term for universities, especially in the thirteenth century, was *universitas*, meaning 'the totality' or 'the whole' in classical Latin. For medieval jurists, *universitas* had become the general term used to designate all kinds of community or corporation, and therefore one had to specify the object to which one was referring. So, if teaching was the topic, one would talk of 'the university of students' or 'the university of masters and students' (*universitas scholarium* or *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*) of such and such a place. The interest of such a formula lies in the fact that it places the emphasis upon the human reality of the medieval universities, which was all the more fundamental given that for a long time these universities scarcely knew any other reality, remaining content with the strict minimum in buildings and finances. The medieval universities were therefore, first of all, organised communities of individuals responsible for higher education⁵.

In contrast to other medieval guilds, the university as a corporation of masters and students was not characterised by a one-to-one relationship between the master and his pupil. Instead, the 'master' title at the university was conferred by all the other masters together⁶, after the delivery of a 'masterpiece', i.e. an examination that usually consisted of a series of substantive questions, followed by a disputation in which the student was required to defend a given position on a predetermined question. If the student was successful, he was awarded the title of licentiate and was

⁴ Because the literature on the origin and background of medieval universities as well as on the contemporary challenges of higher education is so vast, only those sources that have contributed directly to the development of the argument are mentioned, and so without claiming any attempt of comprehensiveness with regard to any of the topics.

⁵ J. Verger, *Patterns*, in H. de Ridder-Symoens (ed.), *A History of the University in Europe. Volume I: Universities in the middle ages*, Cambridge, University Press, 1992, pp. 37-38. This volume is undoubtedly still the best starting point concerning the idea(s) and reality of the medieval university.

⁶ Symbolically, as a reminder of its medieval origin, this tradition has been continued in the Convocation (England) or the General Council (Scotland) as being one of the highest governing organs of the university. It consists of academic staff, but it also includes all graduates who are not active as members of the university. Nowadays, the powers of this body are limited mainly to the election of the university's chancellor.

granted permission to lecture at the university (*licentia ubique docendi*, see section 4)⁷. If he in fact took up a professorial position, he was finally awarded – in a ceremonial act called the *inceptio* – the title of 'doctor' or 'master', meaning only that he was qualified to teach at the university⁸. The regulations with regard to the period and substance to be covered for each degree within each faculty, the requisites for an exam and the rights and obligations of the teaching corps were laid down in the statutes, which, again, ideally were fixed by mutual agreement between masters and/or students⁹.

Turning to the present day, almost none of the respondents in our survey identified the contemporary university in any way with the ideal of a community of professors and students, even though many of them shared the need of more collaboration. Firstly, the cooperation between professors, which indeed exists to a certain extent, is seriously hampered by the increasing competition for positions and funding between individual members of staff. Therefore, and specifically in order to avoid faculty burnout, Janie Crosmer suggests departments to adopt collectivistic values: «It's sometimes hard for professors to feel like they're in a community, a community where they can share the workload. If one faculty member is really busy working on getting a grant, for instance, maybe a colleague could step up and teach their classes. If faculty members didn't feel like they had to do it all, that they had someone within their community to turn to, I think that would help»¹⁰.

Secondly, the collegial community of professors and students (as far as it was more than an idealised picture of course) is definitely lost in the transition to mass universities, from the 1960s¹¹. The seminar as it was intended at the end of the eighteenth century in the Prussian universities of Göttingen and Halle, being a forum for scholarly discussion between students and researchers-lectures on an equal level (at least in theory)¹², is no longer experienced as such by the students of

⁷ R. van Ditzhuyzen, *The 'creatio doctoris'. Diversity or convergence of ceremonial forms?*, in T. Halversen and A. Nyhagen (ed.), *The Bologna Process and the Shaping of the future knowledge societies. Conference Report from the Third Conference on Knowledge and politics*, Bergen, University, 2005, p. 129.

⁸ Both in Bologna and Paris, the doctoral degree was originally reserved for professors at the law faculty, whereas their colleagues in theology were referred to as masters (*magisters*). Gradually, however, it became customary to apply the title of 'doctor' in all higher faculties (theology, medicine, civil law and canon law) and to use the title of 'master' for teachers at the preparatory arts faculty (a practice with traces in the English title of M.A.). In regions such as the Germanic nations, however, both titles remained and were used interchangeably. E. Horn, *Die Disputationen und Promotionen an den Deutschen Universitäten vornehmlich seit dem 16. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz, 1968, p. 114.

⁹ In universities that followed the Bolognese pattern the statutes were fixed rather by the student corporations; in universities of the Parisian type rather by the teachers; yet in the latter, the faculties of arts provided the institutional framework of the collegial responsibility of masters and students for the *studium*. J. Verger, *Fakultät, -en*, in *Lexikon des Mittelalters*, Munich, LexMA-Verlag, 1987, vol. 3, pp. 215-217.

¹⁰ A.W. June, *Faculty Burnout Has Both External and Internal Sources*, *Scholar Says*, «The Chronicle of Higher Education», June 9, 2010, <http://chronicle.com/article/Faculty-Burnout-Has-Both/65843/?sid=at&utm_source=at&utm_medium=en> (accessed: January 14, 2014). See J. Crosmer, *Professional burnout among U.S. full-time university faculty: Implications for worksite health promotion*, Texas Woman's University, ProQuest, UMI Dissertations Publishing, 2009.

¹¹ C. Kerr, *The Great Transformation in Higher Education, 1960-1980*, New York, SUNY Press, 1991.

¹² R.S. Turner, *University Reforms and Professorial Scholarship in Germany 1760–1806*, in L. Stone (ed.), *The University in Society: Europe, Scotland, and the United States from the 16th to the 20th Century*, Princeton, University Press, 1974, vol. 2, pp. 495–532.

today. Only in very small departments, like astronomy, or in small campus universities, like the KU Leuven Kulak, some kind of community spirit is still perceptible.

And what is more, thirdly, the large increase in student numbers also contributed to the loss of a community spirit among the students themselves. In this regard the students participating in our seminar (itself indeed being inspired on the Prussian example) indicated the need of separate rooms where they would have the opportunity to discuss together the content of courses and lectures (if possible even together with staff members), in order to create in that way a community identity, apart from typical student-like activities such as hazing or songfests. The KU Leuven has tried to meet this demand by opening the AGORA Learning Centre in April 2013, intended for students and staff. Institutionally being part of the university library, it advertises itself as «more than a building. It is an all-embracing learning space, where students can learn the way they want to. [...] AGORA stands for 'market place' in Greek, a social meeting place. In Leuven AGORA also stands for a social hub where students and staff of our university can meet together»¹³. However, despite these good intentions, the first self-evaluation proofs that the learning centre is extremely popular among students, yet largely fails to attract substantive numbers of staff. The fact that the latter are judged primarily on other tasks than teaching is at least part of the explanation for their absence. In result, an increasing community spirit between 'masters' and 'students' remains forthcoming.

The large increase in the number of students between 1955 and 1970 and again from the 1990s, could tempt one to conclude that the medieval ideal of an open access to the university is finally realised. Indeed, also in this regard the university presented itself as a universal, supranational community. Particularly the mode of organisation of the earliest university colleges took its inspiration in the main from that of the mendicant monasteries. They were exclusive in the sense of being intended for the intellectual elite from the whole Christianity, but, at least in principle, limited financial means or being of low birth could not be an objection to enter them. However, at the latest in the course of the sixteenth century this somewhat naïve ideal, de facto gradually was replaced by an increasing aristocratisation of the university¹⁴.

Jumping again to today, great doubts remain about the social effects of the democratisation of higher education, despite the impressive increase in the number of students. «This seems, it is alleged, to have missed its ultimate target, since at present children of the less educated make two to four times less use of it than do children of the more highly educated», Marc Depaepe introduces his article in which he pleads for a more critical approach of statistics with regard to the university expansion¹⁵. Moreover, there is no doubt that worldwide the quantitative increase goes hand in hand with a devaluation of diplomas¹⁶. Or with other words, at any rate that is how an increasing number of critics in Flanders feel about it, quantity is almost unavoidably at the expense of

¹³ AGORA Learning Centre, <<https://bib.kuleuven.be/english/agora/about>> (accessed: January 14, 2014).

¹⁴ H. de Ridder-Symoens, *Rich Men, Poor Men: Social Stratification and Social Representation at the University (13th-16th Centuries)*, in W. Blockmans and A. Janse (eds.), *Showing Status. Representation of Social Positions in the Late Middle Ages*, Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe 2, Turnhout, Brepols, 1999, pp. 159-176.

¹⁵ M. Depaepe, *Dazzling statistics ? On the university expansion in Flanders and the need for research into the history of education that transcends quantifying sociology*, in P. Smeyers and M. Depaepe (Eds.), *Educational Research: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Statistics*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2010, p. 28.

¹⁶ M. Duru-Bellat, *Recent trends in social reproduction in France: should the political promises of education be revisited?*, «Journal of Education Policy», 23, 2008, no. 1, pp. 81-95.

quality¹⁷, if only because particularly during the second wave of democratisation the increase in student numbers was not followed by a noticeable rise in the number of teaching staff. Overcrowded lecture halls are the result, where students are not more than a number and where any kind of community spirit is out of the question, among the students themselves, let alone between students and professors. In consequence, and to avoid the high dropout rates the demand for stricter entrance conditions sounds always louder. An example like Finland proves indeed that through demanding entrance examinations in combination with huge investments in higher education (itself being free of charge), the university can keep its intellectual elitist character to a certain extent, without having to use limited financial means or being of low birth as objections to enter¹⁸. Of course, in no respect these measures actually result from the background of medieval universities as resembling mendicant orders, but nevertheless in both cases the outcome is a stronger community of 'masters' and 'students', working together at an equal level for the advancement of knowledge.

2. Universal aims of an academic education

Already in the 1960s, Herbert Grundmann's thesis that «the stimulus to the emergence and growth of universities was scholarly and scientific interest, the desire to learn and to know, the *amor sciendi*»¹⁹, has been exposed as being too idealistic or too ideological. «From the very beginning, education was subject to the tension between the fundamental and primary impulse to seek the truth and the desire of many persons to acquire practical training»²⁰, Peter Classen concluded. The study of theology, for instance, was not a precondition for the priesthood, but it could render it easier to enter higher ecclesiastical offices. Gradually the academic degree was recognised as evidence of scholarly qualification and it became a characteristic mark of professional elites engaged in the cure of souls, legal practice, governmental administration, medical care and education. However, particularly in consequence of its ambition to create not only a professional, but also an intellectual elite, a third expectation of scholars and students towards the university can be identified, viz. general education; or, to use the appropriate expressions dating from the first half of the nineteenth century, liberal education or *Bildung*²¹.

Up to today, professors, students and administrators are struggling to find a balance between these three universal tasks of an academic education: to offer or to get at the same time a profound

¹⁷ M. De Vos and J. Gay, *Hoger onderwijs in tijden van massificatie: de werkvloer van docenten trekt aan de alarmbel: meer kwaliteit, minder kwantiteit is nodig*, Itinera Institute Analyse 2013/15, October 2, 2013, <<http://www.itinerainstitute.org/upl/1/nl/doc/Definitieve%20versie%20rapport%20HO.pdf>> (accessed: January 15, 2014).

¹⁸ O. Kivinen, J. Hedman and P. Kaipainen, *From Elite University to Mass Higher Education. Educational Expansion, Equality of Opportunity and Returns to University Education*, «Acta Sociologica», 50, 2007, no. 3, pp. 231-247.

¹⁹ H. Grundmann, *Vom Ursprung der Universität im Mittelalter*, Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1957, p. 39.

²⁰ P. Classen, *Studium und Gesellschaft im Mittelalter*, J. Fried (ed.), Stuttgart, A. Hiersemann, 1983, p. 25.

²¹ J.H. Newman, *The Idea of a University*, I.T. Ker (éd.), Oxford, Clarendon, 1976 and D. Benner, *Wilhelm von Humboldts Bildungstheorie*, Weinheim, Juventa, 2003.

scholarly schooling, an excellent vocational training and a solid general education²². Within the current prevailing discourse of commodification and functionalism (see section 3), the last mission is clearly the most threatened and, according to some of the respondents in our survey, in particular degree programmes already even completely absent. In her sociological study on the corporate university, Gaye Tuchman puts it as follows, universities are no longer there to educate, but to train²³. On the other hand, there are still many indications of the importance and recognition of some kind of general education and the enduring conviction that a university should offer more than a purely vocational and/or scholarly training. Yet the question remains how this can and should be realised: 1) just by being at the university and living and studying together in a community²⁴; 2) through specific philosophical or historical courses like, for instance, history of medicine for future physicians or history of education within the teacher training programme²⁵; or through the introduction of three broad bachelor programmes (sciences, humanities and social sciences) instead of the dozens of programmes that exist today, as proposed by the previous rector of the KU Leuven Mark Waer in 2011²⁶?

However, Waer's idea was big news for not much longer than a day and the other suggestions too often seem at best just token measures to give an academic cachet to a programme. The ultimate aim of an academic education is first and foremost to prepare students for the labour market, as is shown by André Oosterlinck's (also a previous KU Leuven rector and currently president of the KU Leuven Association) proposal to make tuition fees directly dependent on the demand of employers. The higher the need of graduates in a particular field on the labour market, the lower the fees of these programmes at the university. And although this idea, which was launched only a few weeks after Waer's flash in the pan, was neither realised, it was clearly under much more serious consideration. Particularly the students set their face against this, in their opinion, absolutely undemocratic measure. According to Michiel Horsten (at the time chairman of the Flemish Students' Union), the proposal proves not only that vocational training is the alpha and omega of an academic education, but also that vocational training is increasingly limited to an extremely specialised kind of scholarly schooling of engineers, natural scientists and medical professionals²⁷.

Yet also in human and social sciences, overspecialisation and a purely scholarly schooling that is insufficiently connected to the real professional practice is an old sore. Following complaints

²² About the search for a compromise between these three tasks of an academic education in Belgium during the nineteenth century (when these three missions were increasingly identified with the German, the French and the English model), see P. Dhondt, *Un double compromis. Enjeux et débats relatifs à l'enseignement universitaire en Belgique au XIXe siècle*, Gent, Academia Press, 2011.

²³ G. Tuchman, *Wannabe U: Inside the Corporate University*, Chicago, University Press, 2009. See also R. Arum and J. Roksa, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, Chicago, University Press, 2010.

²⁴ E.g. N.C. Burbules, *Spaces and Places in the Virtual University*, in P. Smeyers, M. Depaepe and E. Keiner (eds.), *Educational Research: The Importance and Effects of Institutional Spaces*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2013, pp. 167-176.

²⁵ E.g. K. Salimova and E.V. Johannigmeier (eds.), *Why should we teach history of education?*, Moscow, International academy of self-improvement, 1993 and J.E. Larsen (ed.), *Knowledge, Politics and the History of Education*, Studies on Education 2, Berlin, LIT Verlag, 2012.

²⁶ K. Herbots and R. Amkreutz, *Uniefs hervormen bacheloropleidingen*, «De Morgen», September 9, 2011. See also M. Waer, *De triple helix universiteit: een veranderende universiteit in een veranderende samenleving*, September 16, 2011, <<http://www.kuleuven.be/openingacademiejaar/0910/toespraken/rector.html>> (accessed: January 17, 2014).

²⁷ *Moeten te populaire studies duurder worden?*, «Klasse voor Leraren», 2011, no. 218, p. 17.

(mostly uttered by students) often return in evaluations of degree programmes: an imbalance between purely theoretical and more practical courses, professors who do not have any feeling with the professional practice they are talking about, and the lack of apprenticeships. Indeed after all, only a very small minority of the students will continue as a researcher, even though all of them are trained to become one. At the same time, according to these evaluations, possible counteractions should not be at the expense of the general education²⁸. An interesting remark in this regard, which was added by the students involved in our seminar, is the objection that for them it is not always possible to assess the value of certain courses immediately. Sometimes they are only appreciated at a later stage of their education or even their life. As it is this involves a certain risk, because evaluations by students (including the criterium of the usefulness of a particular course) are one of the instruments (it is true in general not the most important one, see further in this section) in the general assessment of teaching staff and their chances of promotion²⁹. Together, all these elements proof that the scale can easily tip, both to scholarly schooling and to vocational training, yet usually at the expense of the much sought-after general education.

Almost as a matter of course, the concern about overspecialisation leads to another major tradition of the medieval university as a universal institution, viz. the aim to provide universal knowledge that was not yet split up in tiny specialised fields. The somewhat more 'specialised' curriculum of the higher faculties of theology, law and medicine, was balanced out in two ways. Firstly, the obligatory and broad preparatory education in the faculty of arts (*artes*) included subjects that nowadays would be considered belonging to human sciences (such as grammar and logic), as well as others belonging to natural sciences (such as geometry and arithmetic). Secondly, the disciplines of the higher faculties themselves gave evidence of a strong identity of unity, all of them being *artes liberales*, to be distinguished from the *artes mechanicae*. According to the Swiss historian Walter Rüegg, the question why certain disciplines were in- or excluded from the teaching programme of the faculties can only be explained by the fundamental significance of the *amor sciendi*:

Faculties emerged only where there were previously schools which transmitted knowledge as public good and where attendance was basically open to everyone capable of performing at the required intellectual standard. Even the practically oriented field of medicine³⁰ developed into a scientific discipline only

²⁸ By way of example, about the difficult search for a balance between preparing students for the professional practice and preserving the scholarly character of the education; with regard to teacher training, see M. Simons and G. Kelchtermans, *Teacher professionalism in Flemish policy on teacher education. A critical analysis of the Decree on Teacher Education (2006) in Flanders (Belgium)*, «Teachers and teaching: theory and practice», 14, 2008, no. 4, pp. 283-294; with regard to linguists and philologists, see K. Convents, *Het diploma Germaanse talen op de arbeidsmarkt. Een onderzoek bij germanisten van de K. U. Leuven (1967-1995)*, «Mededelingenblad van de Leuvense Germanisten», 10, 1997, <<http://alum.kuleuven.be/germaanse/mededelingenblad/convents.htm>> (accessed: January 20, 2014); with regard to several degree programmes in humanities, see *Leven na Letteren*, «Uit het Erasmushuis, Tijdschrift van de Alumni Letteren Leuven», 3, 2013, pp. 1-183.

²⁹ T. Ito, *Historians and the present: on Marc Depaepe's decalogue*, «Zeitschrift für pädagogische Historiographie», 16, 2010, no. 1, pp. 43-45.

³⁰ In general a distinction was made between on the one hand external medicine (surgery) being taught at a *collegium medicum* in a corporate fashion, and on the other hand internal (speculative) medicine that was part of the medieval university curriculum. Only from the end of the eighteenth century, gradually surgery was introduced at university

when knowledge based on the study of theories of natural philosophy and medicine drawn from ancient and Arabic-Jewish texts, and from empirical observation, was introduced. [...] It was very different in building construction and in other *artes mechanicae*. In these, admission and training were dominated by guilds or corporate bodies formed on the basis of status; admission was often limited by connections of kinship. They were, moreover, oriented immediately towards the formation of practical occupational skills. [...] As a matter of fact, a comparison between the socially no less relevant 'mechanical' sciences, which were transmitted through guild-like arrangements, and the subjects taught at university shows the significance for the development of academic disciplines of the opportunities allowed by the *scholè* for leisure as an emancipation from the immediate care of gaining one's daily bread which is characteristic of ordinary occupations³¹.

These unifying characteristics of the disciplines at the medieval university (not to be dealing immediately with practical occupational skills and sharing a common method of study, i.e. the study of texts and empirical observation) do no longer apply to the disciplines at the contemporary multiversity³². The universality and unity of knowledge is replaced by ever increasing specialisation and discipline formation³³, processes that can not be countered by existing attempts of (moreover too often only rhetoric) interdisciplinarity³⁴. However, in order to be able to develop critical thinking (being included in the idea that universities are not only there to train, but also to educate³⁵), a certain degree of interdisciplinarity is needed and particularly the capability to come loose from the own discipline. Instead of locking oneself up within the own discipline, a certain distance is required, both from the prevailing theories in the own field and from the society³⁶. For instance, to what extent students of economics are encouraged to question economic growth, or to what extent future physicians are made aware of the uncertainty of medicine, which itself raises doubts about the infallibility of evidence based medicine³⁷? Indeed, the majority of medical students who participated in our survey, mentioned that they were taught to consider their textbooks the 'medical bible'.

The development of this kind of critical thinking requires time. Students however, complain about not having enough time at their disposal, being absorbed by courses, papers and deadlines,

level. See P. Dhondt, *Transnational Currents in Finnish Medical Education, (c. 1800-1920), Starting from a 1922 Discourse*, «Paedagogica Historica. International Journal of the History of Education», 48, 2012, no. 5, pp. 692-710.

³¹ W. Rüegg, *Themes*, in De Ridder-Symoens (ed.), *A History of the University in Europe. Volume I*, 1992, pp. 25-30.

³² C. Kerr, *The Uses of the University*, 5th ed., Harvard, University Press, 2001 and M.A. Bernstein (ed.), *The Uses of the University: After Fifty Years*, «Social Science History», 36 (2012), no. 4, 473-615.

³³ W.R. Woodward and R.S. Cohen, *World Views and Scientific Discipline Formation*, Boston Studies in the Philosophy and History of Science 134, Dordrecht, Springer, 1991.

³⁴ E.g. A. Rohstock, *The History of Higher Education - Some conceptual remarks on the Future of a Research Field*, in D. Tröhler and R. Barbu (eds.), *The Future of Education Research: Education Systems in Historical, Cultural, and Sociological Perspectives*, Rotterdam, Sense Publishers, 2011, pp. 91-104 and B. Engler, *The Rhetoric of Interdisciplinarity*, September 25, 1992, <<http://www.balzengler.ch/files/Rhetoric-of-Interdisciplinarity.pdf>> (accessed: January 20, 2014).

³⁵ R. Barnett, *Higher Education: A Critical Business*, Bristol, Open University Press, 1997.

³⁶ D.J. Frank and J.W. Meyer, *Worldwide Expansion and Change in the University*, in G. Krücken, A. Kosmützky and M. Torka (eds.), *Towards a Multiversity? Universities between Global Trends and National Traditions*, Bielefeld, transcript Verlag, 2007, pp. 19-44.

³⁷ R.C. Fox, *The Evolution of Medical Uncertainty*, «The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly. Health and Society», 58, 1980, no. 1, pp. 1-49.

without having the opportunity to bury themselves in a specific topic, as intended by Wilhelm von Humboldt in his striving for *Einsamkeit und Freiheit*³⁸. Lecturers for their part can not invest enough time in teaching because education is increasingly considered a task of secondary importance, in their personal targets as well as in the financing scheme of higher education in general³⁹. It is sometimes frightening how explicitly it is spoken about this. During the period of our seminar, the faculty board of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University declared openly that a reform of the degree programme in educational sciences was needed, not to improve the quality of the teaching programme, but only to abolish a certain number of courses in order to give the teaching staff more opportunities for research. Rationalisation, it is called. Cynically enough, some of the students who participated in the seminar had a seat in the board as students' representatives. Of course, one could be happy about the openness of decision-making in a case like this, yet to the students, the experience showed particularly how difficult it is to escape the neoliberal policy; even though up to today precisely the combination of research and teaching (including vocational training, scientific schooling and general education) characterises the university.

3. In the service of the public interest

Along with research and teaching, the generally accepted triad of the tasks of the current university also includes service to the society. The medieval university too was intended to be of use for the society as a whole, transmitting universal knowledge to everyone who was interested in it, without the regular borders of other corporate-like institutions. Because in this way the university was indisputably in the public interest and thus serving not only the interests of the own guild, her members enjoyed all kinds of privileges with a universal validity: separate academic jurisdiction, exemption from particular taxes, students were exempted from military service, graduates were ennobled and allowed to wear weapons and special clothing and, of course, there was the highly praised academic freedom⁴⁰. The question why the early universities enjoyed such a wide degree of autonomy, can only be explained by taking into account that serving the desire to learn and to know, the *amor sciendi*, was in the public interest. Nevertheless, from the start the fundamental value of the academic freedom of the university as a corporate community stood in potential conflict, on two fronts: internally between the freedom of the individual and the collegial solidarity of the members of the university, and externally between the requirements of the university for autonomy and control by those who supply the necessary financial resources⁴¹.

³⁸ H. Schelsky, *Einsamkeit und Freiheit. Idee und Gestalt der deutschen Universität und ihrer Reformen*, Düsseldorf, Bertelsmann Universitätsverlag, 1971.

³⁹ P. Loobuyck, *Welke academici willen we? Pleidooi voor meer maten en gewichten*, in P. Loobuyck, G. Vanheeswijck, W. Van Herck, E. Grieten and K. Vercauteren (eds.), *Welke universiteit willen wij (niet)?*, Gent, Academia Press, 2007, pp. 11-25.

⁴⁰ M. Meyhöfer, *Die kaiserlichen Stiftungsprivilegien für Universitäten*, «Archiv für Urkundenforschung», 4, 1912, pp. 294-314 and 395-413.

⁴¹ W. Rüegg, *Foreword*, in De Ridder-Symoens (ed.), *A History of the University in Europe. Volume I*, 1992, p. xxvii.

According to a growing number of critics, both coming from in- and outside the academic world, the last mentioned group of people - those who supply the necessary financial resources - are gradually taking over the contemporary university. For some doom-mongers this development has that kind of impact that it even threatens the survival of the university as such, others are much more moderate in their criticism and sometimes even point to the advantages of, for instance, a close cooperation between the university and the industry. However, nobody denies that the ruling discourse in higher education is one of commodification, neoliberalism, functionalism, usefulness and rationalisation⁴². The simplistic ideal of the university being solely in the public interest is definitely lost. As mentioned before, the assignment of tasks of the current university is decided by the financing scheme of higher education, rather than by the perceived needs of the society. The model to divide the limited financial resources also encourages an excessive supply of PhD graduates on the labour market and a proliferation of scholarly articles that nobody can still handle and the quality of which often disappoints. The intolerable pressure to publish or perish is certainly one of the explanations for a growing number of cases of scientific fraud⁴³.

Research and its results are increasingly privatised and commercialised. Knowledge is no longer a public good, but in a growing number of cases owned by the client (be it an industrial company, a government institution or a private person) who commissions the research⁴⁴. Despite the claims of the preservation of the independency of the individual researchers, the trend of supporting and enabling university research through external funding inevitably has an impact on this research, if

⁴² The literature on the recent commodification of higher education is extremely extensive, just some examples: D. Bok, *Universities in the Marketplace: The Commercialization of Higher Education*, Princeton, University Press, 2003; D.L. Kirp, *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education*, Harvard, University Press, 2004; D.S. Greenberg, *Science for Sale: The Perils, Rewards and Delusions of Campus Capitalism*, Chicago, University Press, 2007; F. Donoghue, *The Last Professors: the Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*, Fordham, University Press, 2008; C. Lorenz (ed.), *If you're so smart, why aren't you rich? Universiteit, markt & management*, Amsterdam, Boom, 2008; S. Slaughter and G. Rhoades, *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State and Higher Education*, Johns Hopkins, University Press, 2009; L. Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2010; A. Hacker and C. Dreifus, *Higher Education?: How Colleges are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids and What We Can Do About It*, New York, Times Books, 2010; C. Krijnen, C. Lorenz and J. Umlauf (eds.), *Wahrheit oder Gewinn? Über die Ökonomisierung von Universität und Wissenschaft*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2011; A.M. Martínez-Alemán, *Accountability, Pragmatic Aims, and the American University*, New York, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2011; M. Simons, L. Lundahl and R. Serpieri (eds.), *The Governing of Education in Europe: commercial actors, partnerships and strategies*, special issue of «European Educational Research Journal», 12, 2013, no. 4. An interesting historical introduction to the idea of the university as a company in the Dutch context is offered by L.J. Dorsman and P.J. Knegtmans (eds.), *Het universitaire bedrijf. Over professionalisering van onderzoek, bestuur en beheer*, Universiteit & Samenleving 6, Hilversum, Verloren, 2010.

⁴³ E.g. A. Jha, *False positives: fraud and misconduct are threatening scientific research*, «The Guardian», September 13, 2012, <<http://www.theguardian.com/science/2012/sep/13/scientific-research-fraud-bad-practice>> (accessed: January 21, 2014) and D. Coeckelbergh, *Universiteiten, universitaire titels, thesissen, onderzoek en fraude*, «De Wereld Morgen», March 24, 2013, <<http://www.dewereldmorgen.be/blogs/dirk-coeckelbergh/2013/03/24/universiteiten-universitaire-titels-thesissen-onderzoek-en-fraude>> (accessed: January 21, 2014).

⁴⁴ E.g. C.M. Flick, *Wem gehört das Wissen der Welt*, Convoco! Edition 3, Frankfurt am Main, Frankfurter Verlagsanstalt, 2011 and K. Debackere, *Commercialisering van universitair onderzoek*, in B. Pattyn and G. Van Overwalle (eds.), *Tussen Markt en Agora. Over het statuut van universitaire kennis*, Leuven, Peeters, 2006, pp. 137-179.

only through the choice of topics. But does this impact reach not much further? Isn't it known that pharmaceutical companies have an influence on medical literature⁴⁵, and isn't this a direct threat to fundamental research⁴⁶? And what is more, not only these trends as such are alarming, but also how organisational, political and cultural contexts have hindered social and political activism by academics against this development. As Sandra J. Grey shows for New Zealand, «declining resources and increased accountability mechanisms in the tertiary education sector have intersected with a cultural context dominated by pragmatism and instrumentalism to constrain activism by academics. Despite these constraints, the author argues that it is crucial for academics to be involved in forms of day-to-day resistance and to establish ongoing connections to activist organisations in order to challenge the hegemonic narratives of marketisation and managerialism which are impacting on all parts of New Zealand society, including universities»⁴⁷.

Back to the Flemish context, there is the well-known case of Barbara Van Dyck. In May 2011, Van Dyck, at the time researcher at the Department of Architecture of the KU Leuven, participated in a protest of the Field Liberation Movement. On an experimental field of the chemical company BASF, the Flemish Institute for Biotechnology (VIB), the Institute for Agricultural and Fishing Research (ILVO), Ghent University and University College Ghent a number of genetically modified potato plants was rooted up and replaced by biological plants. The campaign of civil disobedience was combined with an agricultural and info fair, a debate about an alternative agricultural model and a demonstration. The legal sanctions against the activists were very repressive. Recently they were sentenced for formation of a gang, devastation and theft. Three days after the exchange of potato plants, the KU Leuven took a direct action. Because Van Dyck sympathised publicly with the protest campaign, she was dismissed summarily, even though she always emphasised that she supported the protest as a citizen and not as an academic. In a few days, more than 4000 people signed a petition with the request to annul the dismissal. The main motivation behind the petition was that «whether one agrees with the aim and tactic of this action or not, the sanction is disproportionate and a breach of academic freedom and freedom of speech»⁴⁸. However, neither the petition nor numerous attempts of consultation had any result. Van Dyck had to wait until December 2013, and more precisely until Waer was succeeded by Rik Torfs as the new rector of the KU Leuven, before she was taken back into her employment. Torfs had always openly expressed his regret about the dismissal and during the rectorial election campaign he continuously declared his willingness to embark on a new course with higher education in general.

The whole debate on the case gave a strong impulse to the slow science movement that

urges rethinking the current university, against the fast, competitive, benchmarked research that not only restricts the choice of research topics and curricula but also threatens the quality of the knowledge. The emergence of the 'Slow Science' movement reveals a resistance against the restructuration of the

⁴⁵ E.g. R. Smith, *Medical journals are an extension of the marketing arm of pharmaceutical companies*, «Plos medicine», 2, 2005, no. 5, pp. 364-366 and E.G. Nabel, *Conflict of interest - or conflict of priorities?*, «New England Journal of Medicine», 355, 2006, no. 22, pp. 2365-2367.

⁴⁶ E.g. W. von Rahden, *Zweckfreie Forschung*, special issue of «Gegenworte», 26, 2011, no. 2.

⁴⁷ S.J. Grey, *Activist Academics: what future?*, in P. Woods and E. Blass, *The Future of Higher Education*, special issue of «Policy Futures in Education», 11, 2013, no. 6, pp. 701-711.

⁴⁸ *Reinstate her now!*, <<http://threeerottenpotatoes.wordpress.com/reinstate-her-now/>> (accessed: January 21, 2014). The website assembles all kinds of details and documents related to this case.

university into a science enterprise, increasingly dependent on industrial and other outsider interests; it reveals a resistance against science that is seen as a purveyor of technological innovation and increased competitiveness on a globalized market⁴⁹.

Instead, researchers need time to think and to digest and to be allowed to make mistakes or, as one of the previous rectors of the KU Leuven once put it to the pope in 1985, «researchers have the right to go astray»⁵⁰. The worldwide slow science movement is accompanied by other kinds of protest campaigns against the commodification and privatisation of higher education. For instance, in September 2012, Canadian students' unions gained a memorable victory after six months of strikes, demonstrations and actions, when the new government in Quebec decided to meet all their demands⁵¹. Again in Flanders, the Action Group Higher Education argues in favour of, among other measures, a readjustment of the financing scheme of higher education, the use of qualitative criteria in research evaluations, a balance between doctoral, postdoctoral and senior researchers, and career counselling of young researchers. In line with the other initiatives, they are convinced that a profound change of policy is needed to enable the university to continue to play its public role⁵². Of course, whether at the end of Torfs' rectorship, the KU Leuven indeed will have become again more of a public institution, remains to be seen.

4. The university as an international institution

Undoubtedly a major challenge in this regard is the fact that on the one hand the KU Leuven unilaterally can decide to change its policy to some extent, but on the other hand the university is part of a global system in which universities all over the world are competing with each other. And, till further notice, university rankings are still based mainly on quantitative factors such as the number of academic papers, citation impact, research income, the number of Nobel Prize winners, PhDs awarded, the ratio of international to domestic students or the ratio of international to domestic staff. Therefore, a thorough reform only has a real chance of success when also on the national and international level a change of mentality gets on the move.

One of the necessary reforms that has not been mentioned yet, concerns the gap between rhetoric and practice with respect to internationalisation and academic mobility⁵³. It often seems much more

⁴⁹ *Slow Science*, <<http://threeerottenpotatoes.wordpress.com/independent-science-2/>> (accessed: January 21, 2014). See also <<http://slow-science.org/>> (accessed: January 21, 2014) and R. Boomkens, *Topkitch en slow science. Kritiek van de academische rede*, Amsterdam, Van Gennep, 2008.

⁵⁰ P. De Somer, *Een visie op de universiteit*, Leuven, Universitaire pers, 1985.

⁵¹ J. Nadeau, *Carré rouge: le ras-le-bol du Québec en 153 photos*, Québec, Fides, 2012.

⁵² See <<http://actiegroep Hoger Onderwijs.wordpress.com/>> (accessed: January 21, 2014). See also G. Biesta, M. Kwiek, G. Lock, H. Martins, J. Masschelein, V. Papatsiba, M. Simons and P. Zgaga, *What Is the Public Role of the University? A Proposal for a Public Research Agenda*, «European educational research journal», 8, 2009, no. 2, pp. 249-254 and M. Simons, M. Decuypere, J. Vlieghe and J. Masschelein, *Curating the European University. Exposition and Public Debate*, Studia Paedagogica 45, Leuven, University Press, 2011.

⁵³ P. Dhondt, *Uitdagingen en kansen voor onderzoekers in het buitenland. Enkele persoonlijke bedenkingen*, «Mededelingenblad van de Belgische Vereniging voor Nieuwste Geschiedenis / Bulletin d'Information de l'Association Belge d'Histoire Contemporaine», 32, 2010, no. 1, pp. 43-46.

important to have been abroad, than what one has been doing abroad⁵⁴. Doctoral students and postdoctoral researchers who want to go abroad (and especially those who do not leave from the home institution within the framework of an exchange programme) still meet too many (practical) challenges that do not receive sufficient attention in the debate, such as the nationally oriented character of research funding with often a clear preference for nationally relevant topics or very specific funding criteria that can only be met by national citizens; language barriers that make it more difficult to build up a local or national network or to take or to give lessons at the foreign institution; all kinds of practical limitations with regard to the nice slogan of the European Union on the free movement of persons, for instance concerning health insurance, unemployment benefit or pension benefits; or the false uniformity of diplomas as one of the outcomes of the Bologna reform. Indeed, in many participating countries the bachelor-master system has been implemented without actually changing the existing national system. This also implies that particularly those diplomas that involve social rights are still not recognised outside the issuing country, but after a long and expensive ratification process. Moreover, the introduction of the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System has transformed the university almost in a kind of supermarket where students are gleaming their credits.

Without holding a plea to introduce English (or another major international language) as the contemporary equivalent of medieval Latin, nevertheless the true international character of the earliest universities again could be a source of inspiration. Mobility was the fundamental condition for the acquisition of academic knowledge and not just something which looked nice on the CV. Someone who wanted to study, had to travel, to overcome long distances and borders and to get really involved with foreign customs and traditions (and not just on a superficial level)⁵⁵. Concerning their diploma, things were a bit easier. All graduates who had received the title of licentiate (the *licentia ubique docendi*) were granted permission to lecture at all the universities within the Christian world. Because the universities were founded and/or recognised by an authority with a universal status, be it the Pope or the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation, the degrees granted by these institutions had a universal validity⁵⁶. Any kind of competition between the different institutions was (still) out of the question, even though of course some of them, such as Paris for instance, had a larger attraction than others.

3. Conclusion

A stay abroad in such a context and starting from that kind of intentions required time, necessary to learn the language, to integrate in the local community and to become acquainted with local practices. According to the respondents in our survey, time is probably most threatened at the contemporary university. Researchers no longer have the time, neither to go abroad and get the

⁵⁴ Loobuyck, *Welke academici willen we?*, 2007, p. 22.

⁵⁵ M. Schuh, *Ingolstadt oder Italien? Möglichkeiten und Grenzen akademischer Mobilität im Reich des 15. Jahrhunderts*, in T. Maurer and C. Hesse (eds.), *Von Bologna zu 'Bologna'. Akademische Mobilität und ihre Grenzen*, Itinera 31, Basel, Schwabe Verlag, 2011, pp. 23-45.

⁵⁶ Up to today the doctoral degree enjoys a similar universal validity, but obviously the great majority of students is not graduating with such a diploma.

most out of this experience, nor to digest their research results before translating them into a publication for a highranking journal, nor to invest in teaching. Students no longer have the time to be absorbed by certain topics since they have to obtain a minimum number of credits per year. Therefore, a greater variety is needed, instead of straitjacketing all members of the university, 'masters' as well as 'students'. One of the students who participated in the seminar had been interviewing a professor of astronomy who compared the university with

a galaxy, being a collection of stars with different ways of thinking, just like stars are following different paths, moving fast or slow, in a regular or irregular circle. However, despite this great degree of variety, somehow they still belong together, because in one way or another they are doomed to circle around each other in the same galaxy. They work in the same institution, each of them trying to be innovative in his or her own way.

All the people who have been involved in this seminar, be it as an organiser, a student or an interviewee, have been extremely enthusiastic about this exercise. They appreciated it to reflect on issues they had not been thinking about before, to be forced to look beyond the borders of their own discipline, to get to know the history of the institution they were attached to and through this reflection no longer to take the present situation for granted. Indeed, things do not have to be like they are. When the current university could be regarded again more as a universal institution, a community of masters and students with universal (educational) aims in the service of the public interest in an international context, things could change for the better, even though this call may sound extremely vague and probably much too naïve.

Attachment: Bibliographical list of the texts that were discussed during the first part of the seminar.

Historical approach 1: Wilhelm von Humboldt and *Bildung*

I. Kant, *The conflict of the faculties*, transl. and introd. by M.J. Gregor, Lincoln: University of Nebraska press, 1992, pp. 8-61.

S. Paletschek, *Die Erfindung der Humboldtschen Universität. Die Konstruktion der deutschen Universitätsidee in der erste Hälfte der 20. Jahrhundert*, «Historische Anthropologie. Kultur – Gesellschaft – Alltag», 10, 2002, no. 2, pp. 183-205.

W. von Humboldt, *Ueber die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin*, in Id., *Werke in fünf Bänden*, Stuttgart, J. G. Cotta'sche Buchhandlung, 1964, vol. 4, pp. 255-266.

Historical approach 2: John Henry Newman and liberal education

A. Flexner, *'The Idea of a Modern University'*. *Universities: American, English and German*, Oxford, University Press, 1930, pp. 3–36.

J.H. Newman, *The Idea of a University Defined and Illustrated*, Longmans, Green and Co., 1910, pp. 99–123.

Democratisation and massification

G. Goastellec, *Changes in access to higher education: From worldwide constraints to common patterns of reform?*, in D. Baker and A.W. Wiseman (eds.), *The worldwide transformation of higher education*, International Perspectives on Education and Society 9, Bingley, Emerald Group, 2008, pp. 1-26.

S. Guri-Rosenblita, H. Ebkováb and U. Teichler, *Massification and Diversity of Higher Education Systems: Interplay of Complex Dimensions*, «Higher Education Policy», 20, 2007, no. 4, pp. 373–389.

Commodification of the university

Documentary: M. Smith, *College, Inc. Investigating how Wall Street and a new breed of for-profit universities are transforming the way we think about college in America...*, 2010, 55 min.

R. Boomkens and R. Gabriëls, *Paradoxen van het academisch kapitalisme*, in C. Lorenz (ed.), *If you're so smart, why aren't you rich? Universiteit, Markt and Management*, Amsterdam, Boom, 2008, pp. 107-130.

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F. Gero, *Rankings and Quality Assurance in Higher Education*, «Higher Education in Europe», 33, 2008, no. 2-3, pp. 219 – 231.

J. Mittelstrass, *The Future of the University and the Credibility of Science and Scholarship*, «Ethical Perspectives», 13, 2006, no. 2, pp. 171-189.

Bologna and the unified European university area

H. de Ridder-Symoens, *Nieuwe wijn in oude zakken, of toch niet? De Bolognaverklaring in historisch perspectief*, Amsterdam, Vrije Universiteit, 2001.

S. Michelsen, *Humboldt Meets Bologna*, «Higher Education Policy», 23, 2010, no. 2, pp. 151-172.

M. Simons, *The 'Renaissance of the University' in the European knowledge society: An exploration of principled and governmental approaches*, «Studies in Philosophy and Education», 26, 2007, no. 5, pp. 433-447.

What is a university?

G. Biesta, *What Kind of Citizenship for European Higher Education? Beyond the Competent Active Citizen*, «European Educational Research Journal», 8, 2009, no. 2, pp. 146-158.

J. Masschelein, *Wat is een universiteit? Over de res publica en het publiek maken van dingen*, in B. Pattyn and B. Raymaekers (eds.), *In gesprek met morgen (lessen voor de XXIste eeuw, 2010)*, Leuven, Universitaire Pers, 2010, pp. 259-284.

S. Rothblatt, *Amalgamation and Meiosis in the History of Universities*, in Y. Gingras and L. Roy (eds.), *Les transformations des universités du XIIIe au XXIe siècle*, Collection Enseignement supérieur 13, Québec, Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2006, pp. 223-245.

K. Van Berkel, *Academisch leven. Over geschiedenis, karakter en veerkracht van de Nederlandse universiteit*, Amsterdam, Bert Bakker, 2009.